

A new congregation builds on diversity

Boston Sunday Globe, 7/7/96

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Reconstructionist branch of Judaism forms Duxbury's first Jewish assembly

By Judith Montminy
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DUXBURY — On Friday night, a new page in the region's religious history will be written. A newly formed Jewish congregation will hold its first Sabbath service at 7:30 p.m. in Duxbury's Old Town Hall, marking the first official Jewish presence in the town.

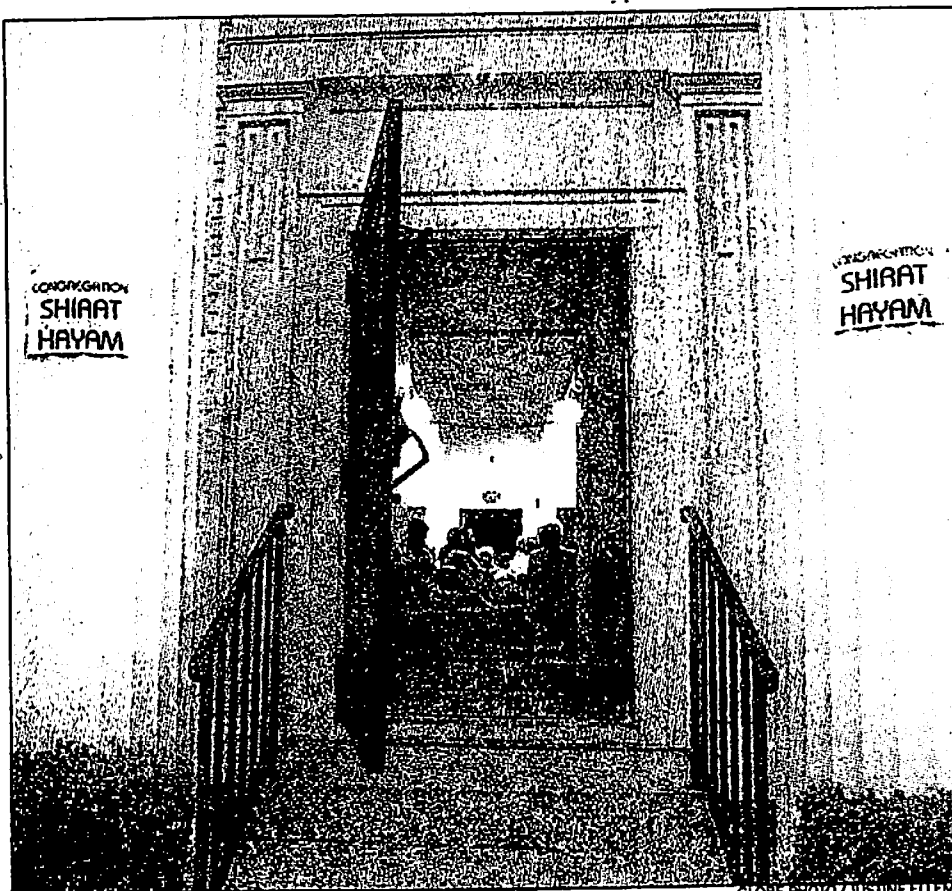
At an informational meeting held last month to introduce Congregation Shirat Hayam (Song of the Sea) and its branch of Judaism, Reconstructionist, much of the evening's discussion centered on the movement's inclusion of non-Jewish family members in all aspects of congregational life.

Each congregation in the Reconstruc-

tionist movement decides which Jewish traditions it will follow and which it will "reconstruct," or develop into relevant and innovative practices. As a result, there is a greater likelihood that a congregation's rabbi will perform interfaith marriage ceremonies. That is not the case in the other three branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform.

"The movement does not have rules, it has guidelines," said Chayim Herzig-Marx, a member of the National Board of the Pennsylvania-based Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. He spoke to a group of more than 50 people at the informational meeting and told them that each congregation decides how it will interpret those guidelines, and each sets its own practices.

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GLOBE PHOTO/JUSTINE ELLEMENT

Congregation Shirat Hayam (Song of the Sea) will hold services at Old Town Hall in Duxbury.

JULY 7, 1996



GLOBE PHOTO / JUSTINE ELLEMENT

Fred Kugel speaks at an informational meeting held last month to introduce Congregation Shirat Hayam.

New Jewish congregation opens

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Many of the founders of the new congregation — 10 families from Scituate to Plymouth — see the acceptance of interfaith marriage ceremonies and full participation by non-Jewish spouses as key reasons for forming the new religious group.

"I hope [the issue] becomes enough of an anchor that we stop discussing it," said Anne B. Meyerson of Plymouth, vice president of the new congregation and head of religious education.

In America today, more than 50 percent of Jewish people marry non-Jews or have children who marry non-Jews, she said. She wants to belong to a congregation that accepts that reality, accommodates it and does not see it as a stumbling block to Jewish life, both secular and religious.

While attention has been drawn to the fact that several of the organizers are forming the new group because they are dissatisfied with Reform congregations in either Hingham or Plymouth, the new congregation's financial secretary takes a different view.

"Forming this new congregation for me is not a negative reaction to any present congregation," said Lawrence Zoller of Scituate, who intends to remain a member of the Hingham congregation as well. "It's that I find with respect to participation the Reconstructionist movement has a very fresh outlook, and I would like to participate. . . . Policies with respect to most religious things in Reform, Conservative and Orthodox [branches] flow from the rabbi and not from members of the congregation."

Reconstructionist congregations are encouraged to question conventional answers and practices. The rabbi does not dominate, even in issues of religious practice and policy. The same egalitarian spirit that is applied to gender-neutral language in the movement's prayer book, and to men and women participants in its congregations, also is applied to the relationship between the congregation and rabbi. Some of the congregations do not have rabbis and hold services led by lay persons. Others, like Congregation Shirat Hayam, will bring in rabbis for special holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The appeal of this broad application of egalitarianism

and the openness to interfaith marriage ceremonies is prompting the founders of Congregation Shirat Hayam to apply for membership in the Reconstructionist Federation. The only other Reconstructionist congregations in Massachusetts are in Andover, Great Barrington, Newton and North Attleborough.

"I'm surprised other [Jewish] congregations haven't formed before," said David Spiegler, president of Congregation Sha'aray Shalom in Hingham, whose 295 member families come from 22 area towns. "There is something very heady and exciting about being involved in a new congregation, being pioneers. I remember that feeling 20 years ago for ourselves," he said.

"Personally, I wish them well," Spiegler said. "I think a thriving Jewish community anywhere on the South Shore will attract more Jews to the area and bring more out of the woodwork. . . . I think there is a large Jewish presence on the South Shore that is unaffiliated."

"There hasn't been a religious presence for the Jewish people until now" in Duxbury, said Msgr. William Glynn of Holy Family Church. He said he expects the Jewish congregation "would be most welcome" to join the town's council of churches, an active group that sponsors social and charity programs and promotes religious life in town.

Robert R. Walsh, minister of the First Parish Church Unitarian Universalist in Duxbury, also expects the town's council of churches to welcome Congregation Shirat Hayam.

"It's a pretty diverse group," he said of the council. "All of us call our institutions churches, which is a name that comes from the Christian tradition, so if we admitted something that wasn't a church, we would have to rethink the name. We might have to change the name to interfaith council, or take the word churches out of the title. There might be some resistance to that." Still, the addition of a Jewish congregation in Duxbury is "a good thing," he said.

"I have general sympathy with religious diversity and with having an atmosphere where people have lots of choices and a general affirmation of congregational life where people can pursue their spirituality in a religious community," Walsh said.